

University of Technology, Sydney
Faculty of Science
Department of Environmental Sciences

**Population ecology of the Australian White Ibis,
Threskiornis molucca, in the urban environment.**

Andrew Charles Michael Smith
BSc (University of Technology, Sydney)

2009



Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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PhD Thesis

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Abstract

The Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*) has dramatically increased in many coastal urban environments, while it has decreased in large areas of its traditional environment range in inland Australia since the 1970s. Ibis are often viewed as pests in urban environments due to the social, economical and environmental problems they can cause. Current, management of ibis in the urban environment predominately focuses on restricting their breeding success, in order to reduce abundances. Management can be costly, labour intensive and limited in its success, due to a lack of detailed knowledge of the ecology of urban ibis. The focus of this thesis is to explore various ecological parameters of urban ibis to increase the effectiveness of their management. Three major breeding/roosting colonies of ibis were monitored weekly for a whole year (2005 to 2006). In addition, five major landfills for domestic waste were investigated for avian abundances and diversity. My main aims were to provide details on the reproductive biology, population dynamics, local and regional movements and the use of landfills by ibis. In comparison to non-urban ibis, urban ibis have a longer breeding period, smaller mean egg volumes and clutch sizes, but a larger range of clutch sizes. They also have a lower hatching success, but higher reproductive success and a higher mean number of fledglings per clutch. Each roosting/breeding and landfill site differed in their reproductive success and/or population dynamics. Ibis used multiple sites for breeding and feeding and were capable of moving over vast distances after they had fledged. The ability of ibis to obtain food from anthropogenic sources appears to be one of the key factors in the urban environment that allows them to survive and breed there. Management plans need to consider this and their decline in their traditional environments to be effective, without harming the overall survival of this native species.

Student declaration

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Andrew Charles Michael Smith

June 2009

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Publications (originating from this study)

Papers:

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- Smith, A. C. M., and Munro, U. (2010). Seasonal population dynamics of the Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*) in urban environments. *Emu* (in press)

Conferences:

- Smith, A.C.M., Corben, D.T., Ross, G., and Munro, U. (2006). The Australia White Ibis – our vulnerable urban pest? *Biodiversity Extinction Crisis Conference*, Sydney, March.
- Smith, A.C.M., Ross, G., and Munro, U. (2007). Breeding success, movements and management of the Australian White Ibis, *Threskiornis molucca*. *Australasian Ornithological Conference*, Perth. December.
- Smith, A.C.M., and Munro, U. (2009). The Australian White Ibis: ecology of an urban waterbird. *Birds and Water – Birds Australia Southern NSW & ACT Seminar*, Sydney, April (by invitation).
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- Smith, A.C.M., and Munro, U. (2009). Food for thought: urban landfills, not a wasteland for some of Australia's birds. *Australasian Ornithological Conference*, Armidale, December.

Table of content

Abstract	ii
Student declaration	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Publications (originating from this study)	v
Table of content	vi
Thesis structure	x
List of tables	xi
List of figures	xii

Chapter 1. General Introduction	Pages 1-30
1.1 Urban wildlife	2
1.2 The Australian White Ibis	3
1.3 Past and present habitat	6
1.4 Status	7
1.5 Management	8
1.6 Reproductive biology	11
1.7 Population dynamics and movements	15
1.8 Aims	21
1.9 References	23

Chapter 2. Breeding Biology (general)

Pages 31-61

Smith, A.C.M., Kikillus, H.K, Ross, G.A., and Munro, U. Breeding biology of the Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*) in the urban environment. *Manuscript prepared for submission.*

2.1 Abstract	32
2.2 Introduction	32
2.3 Methods	34
2.4 Results	40
2.5 Discussion	48
2.6 Acknowledgments	55
2.7 References	55

Chapter 3. Breeding Biology (egg transfer)

Pages 62-77

Smith, A.C.M., and Munro, U. From one nest to another: active transferal of eggs between nests of the Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*). *Manuscript prepared for submission.*

3.1 Abstract	63
3.2 Introduction	63
3.3 Methods	65
3.4 Results	67
3.5 Discussion	69
3.6 Acknowledgments	73
3.7 References	73

Chapter 4. Population Dynamics

Pages 78-99

Smith, A.C.M., and Munro, U. Seasonal population dynamics of the Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*) in the urban environment. *Revised manuscript accepted by Emu in 2010*

4.1 Abstract	79
4.2 Introduction	79
4.3 Methods	81
4.4 Results	85
4.5 Discussion	88
4.6 Acknowledgments	95
4.7 References	95

Chapter 5. Movements

Pages 100-125

Smith, A.C.M., and Munro, U. Local and regional movements of the Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*). *Manuscript prepared for submission.*

5.1 Abstract	101
5.2 Introduction	101
5.3 Methods	104
5.4 Results	108
5.5 Discussion	112
5.6 Acknowledgments	118
5.6 References	118

Chapter 6. Landfills

Pages 126-160

Smith, A.C.M., Thomas, C., Mulquin, D., and Munro, U. Food for thought: urban landfills, not a wasteland for some of Sydney's birds. *Manuscript prepared for submission.*

6.1 Abstract	127
6.2 Introduction	127
6.3 Methods	129
6.4 Results	134
6.5 Discussion	141
6.6 Acknowledgments	150
6.7 References	151

Chapter 7. General Conclusion

Pages 161-166

7.1 Summary of results and conclusion	162
7.2 References	165

Thesis structure

This thesis includes seven chapters. The first chapter provides background information on the ecology of the Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*), identifies gaps in knowledge, and states the significance and aims of this thesis. The next five chapters (data chapters) have been prepared as manuscripts for submission to peer-reviewed journals. Formatting may vary between these chapters and depend on the relevant editorial and other requirements of the journal the manuscript will be submitted to. This means that there exists some overlap and repetition in particular in the methodology and background information of ibis in these chapters. The final chapter summarises the main conclusions from each data chapter, details major findings and their implications, and suggests directions for further research. References are provided for every chapter.

List of tables

Chapter 2. Breeding Biology (general)

Pages 31-61

Table. 1. Estimates of the constants \pm errors from the Quasi-Newton method for the sigmoid-regression lines for body weight and head-bill, bill, wing, tarsus and tail length of young Australian White Ibis between the day of hatching and up to 44 days of age. Equation for calculating the sigmoid-regression lines: $y=a((\exp(b(x+c))-1)/(\exp(b(x+c))+1))+d$ (a indicates the lateral position of the curve (ie. the values where the inflection points lie), b and c determine the Y_{\max} (ie. asymptote) of the equation, d indicates the specific growth rate).

List of figures

Chapter 1. General Introduction

Pages 1-30

Figure 1. Illustration of an immature (left) and adult Australia White Ibis (right) (Pizzey and Knight 1997). Immature and adult ibis can be distinguished through differences in plumage, size and colouration of bare parts (e.g. legs, head, under-wing).

Figure 2. Distribution and nesting records of the Australia White Ibis in Australia (New Atlas data, Birds Australia 2008).

Figure 3. Map of long-term rainfall deficiencies over south-eastern Australia (ABS 2009).

Figure 4. Population abundances of the Australia White Ibis in south eastern Australia between 1983 and 2005 (modified from Porter *et al.* 2006). The solid line represents a three-year moving average.

Chapter 2. Breeding Biology (general)

Pages 31-61

Figure 1. Abundance of active nests of the Australian Whits Ibis during the 2005 – 2006 breeding season for Woy Woy, Lake Gillawarna and Centennial Park.

Figure 2. Body weight (a) and length of (b) head-bill, (c) bill, (d) wing, (e) tarsus and (f) tail of young Australian White Ibis between the day of hatching and up to 44 days of age ($n = 232$ chicks). Sigmoid-regression lines indicate the increase of each parameter over time (day) with the equations and R^2 values located in the bottom right hand corner of each graph. The dashed lines in each graph represent the upper and lower 95% confidence interval of each parameter for adult ibis ($n = 26$). For (b) head-bill and (c) bill, adult males ($n = 15$): black dashed lines, and adult females ($n = 11$): grey dashed lines.

Chapter 3. Breeding Biology (egg transfer)

Pages 62-77

Figure 1. An ibis nest with three eggs. Two of these eggs originate from foreign nests. The labels on the eggs indicate in which nest (number) and sequence (letter) they were laid.

Chapter 4. Population Dynamics

Pages 78-99

Figure 1. Mean (\pm s.e.) roosting population sizes of the Australian White Ibis at Centennial Park, Lake Gillawarna and Woy Woy for six two-monthly intervals from April 2005 to March 2006.

Figure 2. Mean (\pm s.e.) adult and juvenile population sizes of the Australian White Ibis at (a) Centennial Park, (b) Lake Gillawarna and (c) Woy Woy for six two-monthly intervals from April 2005 to March 2006. No age composition is available for Woy Woy during October and November 2005 (total population for this period: 126 birds \pm 8 s.e.). Note differences in the y-axis scale between graphs.

Figure 3. Fly-in preferences of the Australian White Ibis into their roosts/breeding colonies (= centre of circle) at Centennial Park, Lake Gillawarna and Woy Woy between April 2005 to March 2006. The black wedges in the rose diagram represent the mean percentages (outer circle = 100%, inner circle 25%) of the total number of ibis arriving from each direction. The white arrow in the rose diagram for Centennial Park represents the mean south-western fly-in angle and its vector. Rivers are indicated by thin black lines. The Georges River system is in the bottom left corner and runs directly past LG. Targets symbols (circles with alternating black and white inner circles) indicate the locations of major landfills for household waste.

Chapter 5. Movements

Pages 100 -125

Figure 1. Local movements (≤ 100 km radius from Sydney's centre) of ibis ($n = 26$ flight paths). Sites that were visited by ibis are connected by lines with the arrow heads indicating the re-sighting locations. Thin lines ($n = 20$) represent the movement of one ibis between sites; thick lines ($n = 6$) indicate the movement of at least five different ibis moved between the sites. The landfills in the bottom of the graph (Sydney area) are Belrose (top), Eastern Creek (middle) and Lucas Heights (bottom). The landfills at the top of the graph are Woy Woy (left) and Kincumber (right), which are in the immediate vicinity of the Woy Woy ibis breeding colony. The breeding colony at LG (left) and CP (right) are indicated by a black asterisk, all other major breeding colonies (≥ 100 nests: 2005 to 2007) in the wider Sydney region are represented by grey asterices.

Figure 2. Regional movements (≥ 300 km) of ibis ($n = 65$) in eastern Australia. All lines originate at the banding places of ibis and end with an arrow head at the recovery sites of the birds. Four birds were recovered in Southern Papua New Guinea.

Chapter 6. Landfills

Pages 126-160

Figure 1. Mean population sizes (\pm s.e.) of the (a) ibis, and (b) Australian pelican at three major landfills (Belrose, Eastern Creek and Lucas Heights) in Sydney.

Figure 2. Mean population sizes (\pm s.e.) of the (a) Australian white ibis, and (b) Australian pelican at two major landfills (Kincumber and Woy Woy) and a breeding colony (sand island) in the Brisbane Waters region.

Figure 3. Major landfills for household waste and breeding colonies of the Australian white ibis in the Sydney and Brisbane Waters regions, Australia. The sand island (SI) hosted a large breeding colony of ibis and pelicans. Crosses (+) indicate locations of ibis sightings (bird atlas data between January 1998 and February 2008). The grey shaded area roughly indicates the urban areas.